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C O N F I D E N T I A L TEGUCIGALPA 000381

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [SNAR](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KCRM](#) [KJUS](#) [CVIS](#) [HO](#)

SUBJECT: HONDURAN CONGRESSMAN ARMANDO AVILA PANCHAME
SENTENCED TO 20 YEARS FOR DRUG TRAFFICKING

REF: 03 TEGUCIGALPA 1622

Classified By: Political Counselor Francisco L. Palmieri;
Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (U) National Party Deputy, Armando Avila Panchame, who was convicted February 12th for drug trafficking, was sentenced February 19th to 20 years in prison. His sentence stemmed from his arrest July 6, 2003, while attempting to flee the scene of a drug trafficking airplane crash in the eastern department of Olancho (reftel). He subsequently requested that his congressional immunity be waived to stand trial. Avila Panchame's conviction marks the first time a Honduran court has convicted a legislator for drug trafficking.

2. (U) The presiding judge on the case, Ramon Ovidio Navarro, is the newly selected Honduran Attorney General (AG), replacing outgoing AG Roy Edmundo Medina (septel). Navarro is expected to assume his new position on March 12. The verdict was rendered, however, prior to his selection as AG.

3. (SBU) Avila Panchame's conviction and accompanying heavy sentence is a major step forward in the Government of Honduras' (GOH) effort to stem the rampant corruption and sense of impunity that permeates the Honduran Congress. His case received considerable media coverage and generated much public interest. This conviction and sentencing is the first one in some time that will result in a high level GOH official doing considerable jail time for involvement in narcotics trafficking.

4. (C) Comment: Post has heard persistent rumors, emanating from high levels within the GOH, that Avila Panchame's conviction and sentence were intended to "offer him up" as a sacrificial lamb, in an effort to demonstrate to the U.S. the GOH's commitment to combating drug trafficking and corruption at the highest levels. Also, it was a showcase for the new AG candidate to demonstrate his judicial toughness on impunity by corrupt Honduran officials. It remains to be seen, however, what kind of zeal the Public Ministry will exhibit under Navarro's leadership in pursuing other high level cases. Reports on his background raise serious questions about his ability to pursue such cases. Nonetheless, the Avila Panchame conviction is a watershed in Honduras. End Comment.

PALMER